

Song Exploder
Rostam - Bike Dream
Episode 117

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

("Bike Dream" by ROSTAM)

Hrishikesh: Rostam Batmanglij is a songwriter, producer, and composer, who first rose to prominence in 2006 as one of the members of Vampire Weekend. He's produced songs for Frank Ocean, Solange, Carly Rae Jepsen, and more. But his September 2017 album *Half-Light* is his first as a solo artist. In this episode, Rostam breaks down his song "Bike Dream." And coming up, he explains how it was influenced in part by bands like T. Rex and Coldplay. But "Bike Dream" began very differently from how it ended up. Here's Rostam on how the song started.

("Bike Dream" by ROSTAM)

(Music fades)

Rostam: Before there were any lyrics, or any vocal melodies, there was a beat and a song title. A beat that I named "Bike Dream."

(Beat)

Rostam: It must have been around 2007. I had just graduated from college, I think, and I was on my bike a lot. I remember writing the verses to this song in this apartment that I lived in, in Brooklyn Heights, and I had a couple roommates, and they all worked. And I was mostly on tour, but when I wasn't on tour, I had the whole apartment to myself. And I would go into my friend Tim's room, because his room had a huge window that faced the garden, and I would just go in there to get a, sort of, change of scenery, and it inspired me to write. So I'd just bring my laptop in, and I'd play the beat on loop, and I would just sit in front of the laptop and write different verse lyric ideas.

(Vocals with beat)

Rostam: “Bike Dream,” that was just a name. It was just two words that I thought had some kind of power when you put them together, and usually when you name a beat something memorable, it tends to last. And the song title is with us to this day. The original beat, however, is nowhere to be found.

(Beat fades)

Rostam: But it birthed the vocal melodies and the lyrics that I wrote. I wrote most of the lyrics of the song over that original beat, and then I kind of thought like, “There’s something about this beat, I don’t think it’s right for the song.” So I had this other beat that was this kind of like T. Rex vibe. I was trying to do this idea, this ambiguous idea of futuristic T. Rex. This boogie-woogie, that “da, na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na.” Marc Bolan was interested in the idea of boogie like, “What is boogie? What makes something boogie?”

(“I Love to Boogie” by T. REX)

Rostam: [sings da, na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na]

(“I Love to Boogie” by T. REX)

Rostam: It’s groovy [laughter].

(Music fades)

Rostam: So I’m playing the things that like people who are, if they were to play piano and guitar in a band that was doing a boogie-woogie, would do.

(Guitar with piano)

Rostam: It’s a boogie-woogie chord progression. The piano is just playing simple chords, like “duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh.” And then, the guitar is playing that “da, na, na, na, na, na, na, na,” and they’re layered together with some crackle that was just like sampled from vinyl to make it sound old. What is it they say about punk music? It’s three chords and the truth, well what are the three chords, it’s 1, 4, and 5. So this song is basically just different forms of 1, 4, and 5. But I put a lot of care into making it rise above those simple chord voicings, and doing things to make it more harmonically dense.

(Guitar with piano)

Rostam: All the chords are being pitch shifted. What I was thinking about was this idea of like if you're trying to make futuristic T. Rex, what makes it sound futuristic?

(Guitar with piano)

Rostam: I like the way that things sound when they're pitch-shifted. They sound better sometimes. It's like you're sending them through a piece of glass and the light is refracting in an unpredictable way.

(Guitar with piano fade)

Rostam: This was the intro beat.

(Beat)

Rostam: So those are kick and snare samples. I'm using volume automation on a snare to do the work of a drum beat.

(Beat)

Rostam: I was just trying to use the snare dynamics as a source of building up excitement without giving you a groove to fall into.

(Beat ends)

Hrishikesh: After making that beat using samples, Rostam added live drums.

(Drums)

Rostam: Those drums are played by Garrett Ray, who used to be in a band called Foreign Born. And my friend Ariel Rechtshaid, who helped produce this song, he brought Garrett in and those drums were recorded to tape.

(Drums)

Rostam: The pattern that they're playing is exactly doubling the drum pattern that I had programmed, so when you play the programmed drums

(Programmed drums)

Rostam: and the acoustic drums,

(Acoustic drums)

Rostam: at the same time, you shouldn't be able to hear a difference, it should all just sound like one really precise drum performance.

(Drums)

Rostam: I was pretty proud of that drum beat because if you listen to it on its own, it sounds like it was made by a crazy person. And when we were in the studio, and Garrett was trying to play it on real drums, he had to write out measure by measure, and we even recorded it measure by measure because there was no way he could memorize it in the time that we had in the studio. And I'm glad that we did that because I think it added an important element of life to the song.

(Guitar with piano join)

Rostam: So, I had this T. Rex-y beat and I was like, "What if I take the lyrics and melodies from "Bike Dream," and put them together with that T. Rex-y vibe?" And it worked because the original "Bike Dream" beat was about the same tempo as the T. Rex beat. And when I put them together, it wasn't a dramatic shift.

(Vocals join: "You wake up late, you feel your heart begin to work / And now you're all dressed up of course / And hailing cabs out of your door / On 14th Street I feel my head between my knees / And orange swimming through the trees / And orange swimming through the trees")

(Buzzy synth)

Rostam: The buzzy synth is a synth sound that I made in Reason. The volume would modulate in time with the rhythm.

(Buzzy synth ends)

Rostam: This song was mixed by Dave Fridmann. He'd been responsible for producing or mixing or producing and mixing so many songs that I loved that I knew that I could trust him. So, one of the things that Dave Fridmann did was that he put that buzzy synth together with the drums, and he sent them to a compressor to make them all get smashed together.

(Buzzy synth with drums)

Rostam: And as a result, it creates that liquid feeling. It enhances the groove, is a very simple way to think of it.

(Buzzy synth with drums)

Rostam: People think of distortion as something that is out of control, but Dave Fridmann is the master of being a hundred percent in control of distortion, and getting the most out of distortion. Already there's distortion on some of the tracks that I was sending him, and then, he was taking it to another level.

(Music ends)

Rostam: At the end of the song, the guitars come in.

(Guitars)

Rostam: It's two guitars with delay. That guitar line was kind of like the Coldplay element of the song [laughter]. It was guitar with delay, just stepwise motion, shout out to Jonny Buckland.

(Guitar)

Rostam: I think every song needs some Coldplay, I'm a big fan.

(Guitar)

(Synth)

Rostam: That Trident is a synth from the 70s. It's like one of the few old synths that I own.

(Synth)

(Synth ends)

Rostam: What is special to me about that synth is that it's not using computer chips, it's using circuitry and voltage, so it's unreliable. You know, the waver of the pitch isn't something that a programmer is adding in after the fact. The pitch is wavering because it's relying on electricity, and how that electricity is circling

around a coil. To me that sound, it always makes me think of planetarium music, and I had some formative experience as a kid going to the air and space museum, and

(Synth)

Rostam: watching some planetarium filmstrip that I just want to keep recreating that stuff in the music that I make.

(Synth fades)

Rostam: The key is important. If you write a song in a high key, you need to sing loud or have a certain kind of energy in order to hit certain notes, and different parts of your voice are going to access different moods. The second chorus is very low,

(Vocals: "Two boys, one to kiss your neck / And one to bring you breakfast / Get you out of bed when")

Rostam: and then it jumps up an octave.

(Vocals: "Two boys, one to kiss your neck / And one to bring you breakfast / Get you out of bed when")

Rostam: When I was writing that chorus lyric, "Two boys, one to kiss your neck, and one to bring you breakfast, get you out of bed when," I liked the fact that you could interpret it differently, and you could see different things in it. You could see it from a perspective of any number of relationships, gay or straight. I liked that there was an ambiguity to it. At the time, I had not come out in press. I mean it's contextualized by the fact that I am out now, and I have been out now since 2010, so that's the greater context for the song.

(Vocals: "Two boys, one to love you sweetly / One does so discreetly / Never will he meet me / But")

Rostam: I think the line, "Two boys, one to love you sweetly, one does so discreetly," that one I think is kind of one of the most important lines in the song, because I think it reveals that it's not literally two different boys, it's wanting the person that you're with to be two different kinds of people. Maybe wanting a boyfriend who is devoted to you and affectionate, and then also wanting one who's discreet, and maybe there's an impossibility to that.

(Guitar)

Rostam: When this song came out, it came out with a press release about the album, and I did use the word “queer” in a statement about the experience of, you know, feeling like you have two lives. I always was thinking that the musicians that I connected with, were the ones who were proud of who they were, you know, whatever that might be. Whether it was gay or whether it was their ethnicity, that was something that they presented as part of their identity. That was certainly something that I respected in artists that I loved, and I felt like if I had the opportunity to make songs and make music in the world that people would hear, that I would also want to be part of that tradition of being transparent about who I was.

(Cello)

Rostam: I knew that I wanted this album to be connected by every song having strings. And so, I had two friends come in and play those, kind of, chugging chords.

(Double bass joins)

Rostam: It's cello and double bass.

(Double bass with cello)

Rostam: [laughter] Yeah, it's funny because some of those sound like a little off, but I wanted them to not be too perfect. I'm very careful to make sure that there's some looseness in all my recordings.

(Synth joins)

Rostam: I mean, that's what groove is. Groove is defined by imperfection. I find that I just have to trust my ears as opposed to my eyes, because a lot of us who make music with computers, we get attached to recognizing how it should look on the screen, how the waveform should line up with the grid. And I think you have got to get away from that if you want to make the music of your dreams.

(Synth)

(Guitar with piano join)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Bike Dream," by Rostam, in its entirety.

("Bike Dream" by ROSTAM)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more on Rostam, including a link to buy this song. If you love Song Exploder, please leave a review or a rating over at itunes.com/songexploder. And if you want to show people how much you love Song Exploder, you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/merch. Next time on Song Exploder, Lorde.

("Sober" by LORDE)

Hrishikesh: Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons, and is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting-edge podcasts made possible by the Knight Foundation and listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. Follow me on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. You can find all the past and future episodes of the show at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

(Music fades)